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ABSTRACT

The rural superintendency offers unique challenges and insights into the educational process. Rural superintendents require a broader range of administrative training and skills than their urban counterparts, with a strong emphasis on interpersonal skills. The range of problems and daily activities encountered by the rural superintendent is virtually without limit, and as such is a true test of the individual's administrative capabilities. Not everyone is capable of successfully handling such a position, but those who do find a professionally rewarding experience second to none. (Author/BRR)

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THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF A RURAL SUPERINTENDENT

By

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Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Association of School Administrators, (New Orleans, LA, February 26-March 1, 1982).

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ABSTRACT

In an address given at the Annual Conference of the American Association of School Administrators at New Orleans, La., February 26-March 1, 1982, the author maintains that the rural Superintendency offers unique challenges, and insights into the educational process. He suggests that rural Superintendents require a broader range of administrative training and skills than their urban counterparts, with a strong emphasis on interpersonal skills. The range of problems and daily activities encountered by the rural Superintendent is virtually without limit, and as such is a true test of the individual's administrative capabilities. The author suggests that not everyone is capable of successfully handling such a position, but those who do find a professionally rewarding experience second to none.

THE TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS OF A RURAL SUPERINTENDENT

Presentation Given at the Annual Convention of the American Association of School Administrators, February 26 - March 1, 1982, in New Orleans, Louisiana.

By Geoffrey J. Tagg, Superintendent of Schools, School District No. 4 (Windermere), British Columbia, Canada.

Let me begin by saying that I make no apologies whatsoever for being Superintendent of Schools in a small, rural school district. I have taught in both urban and rural systems, and probably would not go back to a metropolitan school district for twice my present salary. Call it "the big fish in the small pond" syndrome, or what you will. There is a challenge, an excitement in being head of a small educational administration that has few equals.

My own district has 1,370 students, a full-time equivalent professional staff of 89 including teachers and central office staff, and nine schools offering instruction from kindergarten through grade 12. Seven of these are elementary schools, one elementary-junior secondary school and one junior-senior high school. The school district is located in a valley stretching about 60 miles from north to south, on the eastern fringe of British Columbia, Canada.

I believe the background I bring to the position is important also, because I am not convinced that everyone can handle the kind of job I, as Superintendent, am required to do. My initial teaching training and teaching experience were in urban schools in England. I was part of the great immigration into Canada in the mid-to-late 1960's. My undergraduate degrees were at Canadian universities, and my graduate studies in the United States. All my teaching and administrative experience in Canada has been in rural areas, where I have taught almost all subjects to all grades, with the major portion of that experience at the elementary level.

I suppose the first thing that should be said about the rural Superintendency in Canada is that it is probably easier to obtain. While the educational requirements for the position are identical, regardless of the position applied for, the rural position tends to attract fewer applicants, many of whom will tend to have the minimum qualifications rather than being overqualified. For example, few rural Superintendents in western Canada hold earned Doctorates, while almost all those in large urban centres do. However, I would not place too much exphasis on this largely irrelevant statistic. I am by no means convinced that the more advanced a person's training is the better qualified he is to do the job. There is, after all, a school of thought that suggests the letters Ph. D. stand for, "Piled Higher and Deeper!"

The administrator in a rural system must, to my way of thinking, be a jack of all trades--and hopefully a master of many of them also. Effective organization is the key to success, for he will be called upon to do many things in the course of a day. Part of the challenge of the job is knowing that for all intents and purposes, you are the boss. It matters little whether you hold the formal title of Chief Executive Officer of the Board as I do. You are the educational leader of that district, and every decision that is taken must reflect that to some extent.

Many Superintendents exhibit one or more strengths as educational administrators, and may have taken specialized training in those fields, or have demonstrated superior practical wisdom over several years. However, in the small district, the Superintendent must have a much broader base of knowledge and experience if he is to succeed. Those of you who work in rural systems know all about split or combined grades in classrooms. Many of you will have recognized as I have that it is more difficult to teach split grades than single grades. The content is greater, the spread of ability of the students is more pronounced. One should only put experienced teachers who have demonstrated competence in single-grade classrooms into such situations if one wants to succeed.

I believe there is a parallel with small-district administration also. One shouldn't try to put in the highly-trained specialist, whose vision is perhaps both narrow and limited, into the rural administrative setting. It is the place for a generalist, who brings to the job a wide range of training, background and experience--and a great deal of adaptability.

Adaptability (or flexibility) is crucial in the rural setting. Changing hats six to ten times a day is a common occurance, and the rural Sueprintendent has to take it all in stride. A typical day might start with dealing with the correspondence. It might include several meetings as diverse as curriculum, budget and finance, home and school meetings or a Board meeting. The day might include an irate parent or two, an upset teacher, a child in trouble with the law, a sexually molested child, a disagreement with the Ministry of Education--or preparing a speech for an administrators' convention! Add to that visits to schools and classrooms, discussions with administrators or other staff, handling a discipline problem on a school bus, planning an adventure playground with the maintenance department, heading off a labour dispute with the custodians or assisting with the preparation of the budget, and one can see that whatever else the job is, it is not boring!

Whether one likes it or not, in the small district these are ALL responsibilities of the Superintendent, and many more. I do not have a host of Assistant Superintendents, subject specialists or administrative assistants to bail me out. I am it. When a problems occurs, it reverts to the top, and I am expected to deal with it. If I don't, the Board of School Trustees will want to know why. The job demands that I have good inter-personal skills, that I have a thorough understanding of the principles and practices of educational finance, that I am conversant with current curriculum and trends for the future. I have to be familiar with the state of school buildings, with projected enrollments and with

needs for the future. I have to successfully walk the tight-rope of Board-administrator relationships, and must constantly present the school system in an informed, accurate and positive light to the many publics we serve.

One need hardly point out that another essential quality of the successful Superintendent in a small, rural district is the ability to handle stress. It is a stressful job, and the administrator who has not learned how to handle it for him or herself is heading for trouble. It is not my intention to dwell on this at great length here, but the key may well be maintaining an appropriate balance between one's personal and one's professional life. One must get away from the job periodically, and do the things that are personally rewarding or fulfilling. The first sign of potential trouble is the belief that one is indispensable, or that the whole operation will fall flat on its face if you are not there.

While boredom and repetition are certainly not factors, there are one or two disadvantages of being the big fish in the small pond. The most obvious is that one is considered to be on call seven days a week, 24 hours a day. I have found that this is rarely abused, however. Once people recognize that on one night a week you will be attending your service club meeting, and on Sunday morning you will be in church from 11:00 a.m.to noon, or whatever, most will respect your privacy. You are not being unreasonable in letting people know you prefer to sleep between 11:00 p.m. and 6:30 a.m., but also let them know that in an emergency you are available. Your employees (and others) should know where you live, when you are available, what your phone number is. The odds are ten to one that, in a small town, they'll know all that, and how many times you went to the Legion last week, and with whom!

So, there is a tendency to live in a goldfish bowl. You are expected to take your place in the leadership of the community, and to maintain high personal and moral standards. You are, and must be visible, which can be both advantageous and a disadvantage at times.

Another problem is that one tends sometimes to get too close to certain interest groups to retain one's objectivity, or that degree of aloofness that sets apart the boss from the worker. One is invited to almost everything--and one is also expected to accept, unless there is a good reason not to do so. But rumours abound! Don't get too close to the teachers, it will cost you at the negotiating table. Don't get too close to the trustees or one particular trustee, or you will lose the trust of the teachers. The examples could go on, and on.

Perhaps the biggest drawback for me is the isolation. Being almost the only person at the top, there are very few people one can turn to for consolation or advice. One has to phone another Superintendent in another area who might have faced a similar problem, but even this does not replace the need we all feel from time to time to sit down with a peer and throw out a few ideas or bat around some questions and concerns.

A teacher phoned up one evening last year. It was 10:45 p.m. She was in a two-teacher school in an isolated community 38 miles from the nearest town. She had been through her first parent-teacher interview that day, and all had gone well until the last parent--who had run her up one wall and down the other for a mark she had given her son. Having no one to defend her, no one to turn to, no one to discuss it with, she turned to the only available comfort she had that night--a bottle of scotch. By the time she phoned me, it was obvious that she had finished most of it. She needed re-assurance that she was a good teacher, that she was going a good job, that somebody cared. She phoned the Superintendent, apparently knowing she would get the support she needed, not a lecture on the evils of drink. I have to fire people, I have to write letters of condolence, I have to reprimand--but I also get to send the "well done" letters, the congratulations cards, and sign the graduation certificates.

I believe another of those keys to success is the ability to distinguish between management decisions on which the Superintendent can act alone, and policy decisions, which require prior consultation with the Board of Trustees. In a small school district, far more, I would suggest than in a large one, the Superintendent is looked to for guidance and input by the Board. It is a wisdom that he or she ignores at his or her own peril.

But for all its trials and tribulations, the rural Superintendency is an intensely satisfying professional experience for those who can handle it. Surely there is no position in the educational system where one can better put one's own training, experience and insight to the test. At some time or another, one is called on to use all one's faculties to explore the complexity of the problem at hand. Am I cut out to be a senior educational executive? Where better to find the answer than here, where one is exposed to the full range of educational decision making. For me, it is not just the best place to be, but the only one, for it is here I feel that I can best serve CHILDREN, the only reason for our existence at all.